DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 116 IR 019 739

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TITLE Electronic Conferencing in Education: An Example from Social Work.
PUB DATE 1999-03-00
NOTE 10p.; In: Proceedings of the Mid-South Instructional Technology Conference (Murfreesboro, TN, March 28-30, 1999); see IR 019 734.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: <http://www.mtsu.edu/~itconf/proceed99/lancaster.html>.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Mediated Communication; Computer Uses in Education; Feedback; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; Interpersonal Relationship; *Social Work; Student Participation; *Teleconferencing
IDENTIFIERS Middle Tennessee State University; Southeast Missouri State University

ABSTRACT

The use of electronic conferencing in undergraduate social work courses at Southeast Missouri State University and Middle Tennessee State University is discussed. Conferencing increases student participation, encourages more effective relationships among participants, and provides additional feedback experiences. Faculty determined that selection of any computer application for courses be guided by specific teaching and learning goals and not by the sense of wonder created by the technology. When selecting computer technology for the classroom, time saving and efficiency are less significant considerations than the quality of the educational experience for the student. Two methods of measuring the student experience are in process: a survey instrument administered to all students who used electronic conferencing in social work classes, and a videotaped panel of students who have used electronic conferencing. (Author/MES)

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Electronic Conferencing in Education: An Example from Social Work

ED 436 116

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Abstract
Introduction
Computer Technology and Social Work Education
What Is Electronic Conferencing?
Applications
Requirements for Electronic Conferencing
Using Electronic Conferencing for Social Work Education
Measurement
Conclusions
References
Contacts

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The use of electronic conferencing in undergraduate social work courses is discussed. Conferencing increases student participation, encourages more effective relationships among participants, and provides additional feedback experiences. Faculty determined that selection of any computer application for courses be guided by specific teaching and learning goals and not by the sense of wonder created by the technology. When selecting computer technology for the classroom time saving and efficiency are less significant considerations than the quality of the education experience for the student.

[Top]

Introduction

This paper describes the electronic conferencing experiences in undergraduate social work programs at Southeast Missouri State University and Middle Tennessee State University. The authors do not argue that our experiences with electronic conferencing would be the same in other settings or academic disciplines. The effectiveness of any computer application in an educational setting is dependent on a supportive infrastructure. Student access to computer labs, the time faculty can devote to learning software, faculty skill in the use of applications, and the level of financial support from the university or college are several factors that can determine the contribution of any information technology to the desired learning environment.

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[Top]

Computer Technology and Social Work Education

The development and use of computer applications in college and university classrooms has expanded at a rapid rate over the last decade (Trow, 1997). Social work education has been part of this growth of technological innovation in the classroom (Caputo, 1990). Clearly there must be ongoing discussion about how the adoption of these new teaching and learning devices will impact student development and faculty-student relationships. The spread of information technology in higher education is problematic if its adoption is not linked to specific outcome goals. Technology decisions must not be driven solely by wonderment over the "bells and whistles" that it offers. The technology based activities developed for the classroom must clearly support the learning environments we wish to create.

For the social work faculty authoring this paper our choice of computer software applications has been shaped by the goals of enhancing the learning environment for prospective entry level social workers. In addition, a practical consideration is that the demand for computer literate, and perhaps fluent, agency personnel is increasing (Gifford, 1998). Social work education must be especially sensitive to this latter demand.

The evaluation of student readiness for sensitive social work practice calls for a high degree of teacher-student interaction. We need to be sure that our students are both emotionally prepared and practically skilled for the demands of professional practice. The need to enhance student participation in class activities, build stronger relationships among students and faculty, and create more avenues of feedback for students should shape the technology that is used in the classroom.

Stimulated and encouraged by the use of e-mail and course web pages, the authors found that electronic conferencing could further enhance the type of learning environment that we felt was appropriate for undergraduate social work education. This application is described below, followed by a discussion of its use in several social work courses.

[Top]

What is Electronic Conferencing?

Electronic conferencing is a computer-based method for communicating and discussing course-related issues outside the classroom. Conferencing provides an asynchronous learning experience that will enhance more traditional activities. Posting to an interactive, computer based "bulletin board" gives students and faculty opportunities to interact after class has ended.

A variety of activities take place through conferencing. Assignments are posted to the conference board, questions raised by both instructor and student, and personal communication takes place between participants. As discussed in more detail below, conferencing encourages greater student participation in class discussions, expands student-faculty interaction, and provides a mechanism for expanding feedback for both faculty and student. By encouraging a wider range of dialogue among all the participants in the learning process, conferencing outside the classroom can construct and enhance what Petraglia (1998) refers to as an authentic learning environment of ongoing exchange and knowledge building. Just learning how to use the conferencing board, for example, becomes a collaborative experience that encourages and enhances other group activities.

[Top]

Applications

An electronic conference has a variety of applications:

- The instructor may use a board to disseminate information about assignments and class.
- Lecture is enhanced by an asynchronous board as students post answers to discussion questions.
- As an alternative, discussions on a board or chat session may be used as a substitute for some traditional class sessions.
- A board and/or chat may be set up for students to collaborate with each other on class projects.
- A board and/or chat may be used for a distance learning course.
- A board provides the opportunity for instructors to more accurately monitor the progress of students.
- A board creates additional opportunities for increased interaction between students and between students and instructors.

[Top]

Requirements for Electronic Conferencing

Several important conditions contribute to the effectiveness of electronic conferencing. Conferencing is not a time saver but a means for enhancing education. It is more easily managed with smaller classes but it is productive with larger classes. Administrative expectations often dictate larger enrollments for classes. Conferencing technology can help to overcome some of the issues of quality that emerge such as limited student-faculty interaction and the sense of alienation that emerges when students become just faces and numbers in classes.

Another foundation for effectiveness in conferencing is the commitment of the instructor to being actively involved in the process. Instructors must participate actively but not to the point that they dominate the discussion. Faculty must be comfortable with the idea of allowing students greater autonomy in the educational process. This may mean that faculty will be required to depart from traditional teaching methods of lecture and test and investigate other strategies that foster learning and growth.

Faculty must also be sensitive to the fact that student skill in computer technology is highly individualized and varied. Instructors need to be sensitive to the reluctance of some students to use the technology while recognizing the advanced capability of others. There will be some students who have knowledge and capability that exceed that of the instructor. Faculty must learn to take advantage of this and not be defensive. The more knowledgeable students will be able to help those students who are less prepared or somewhat phobic about the use of any computer technology. Some class time is needed introducing the conferencing technology. It is common for students to encounter some problems initially, but since conferencing applications are user friendly, they rather quickly become proficient in its use.

[Top]

Using Electronic Conferencing for Social Work Education

The authors of this paper found that electronic conferencing, supported by other educational technologies such as e-mail, course web pages, and presentation software, can improve student participation, enhance the quality of relational experiences, and provide effective mechanisms for feedback. Conferencing can be accessed through a course home page that contains the syllabus and other key links. By placing a link to conferencing in the course home page, assignments for the board are more fully integrated into the course content.

The impact of conferencing on participation, relationship, and feedback is discussed below. These areas are not, however, separate and distinct processes. They are interrelated and circular experiences that support one another in a complex way. Student participation, for example, is influenced by positive, timely feedback to the student's postings to the board. By the same token, effective feedback enhances faculty-student relationships that will, in turn, lead to more productive student participation. The interrelated nature of the three activities is illustrated and described below.

Students are excited when their postings on the conference are treated with dignity and seriousness. They begin to see themselves as participants in a larger teaching and learning process rather than simply passive recipients of "just the facts". The wide range of interaction offered by conferencing allows a complex interrelated process of participation, relationship, and feedback to emerge.

Student Participation: An electronic conference provides an additional "voice" for students who find it difficult to contribute to classroom discussions. Large enrollments often limit participation and dialogue and many students fear personal humiliation by giving a "wrong answer." In addition, students may feel intimidated by other students and faculty who dominate discussions. Students are further discouraged in a traditional setting where communication ends by the clock. The electronic conference is less threatening as a means for students to share their opinions and ideas more freely. Another important benefit is conferencing removes the pressure of being "put on the spot" which students often feel in the classroom setting. They have the opportunity to contemplate and generate questions and responses at a time, and in an environment, that may be more conducive to creative thinking.

The social work faculty noted that, when using the conference, students who were non-verbal in the classroom begin to interact more. They were more active in originating questions and posting responses and their participation in class increased. The following examples illustrate what has been observed as rather common student experiences in the use of conferencing.

Sakina was struggling to grasp and integrate course information. She seemed closed and afraid to express her ideas. Her test scores were marginal and her writing lacked depth and substance. She did not participate in class discussions and seldom interacted with other class members. When asked a question directly, she became flippant and it was clear that she was self conscious, confused, and embarrassed. During an office visit with the instructor she said that she had always been afraid of asking a "stupid" question or giving a "stupid" answer. In addition, she felt intimidated and inferior to her student colleagues who seemed to her so knowledgeable and capable. Encouraging her to talk more in class failed to change her behavior. In a subsequent class Sakina was introduced to electronic conferencing. Initially, her postings to the board were guarded. Her postings lacked confidence and substance. However, after the first week Sakina became one of the most active participants on the board. The substance of her comments improved considerably, she posted questions, responded thoughtfully to the postings of others, and most interestingly, began to post thoughtful daily messages of encouragement. Her classmates responded with complimentary comments and many also communicated directly with her through personal e-mail messages. Students began to comment on Sakina's daily messages in class. She began to participate more readily in class discussions and her personal interaction with her classmates increased significantly. She gained confidence and the quality and quantity of her overall work improved.

Sarah was a very capable student who tested and wrote well. Sarah, however, would not enter into class discussion unless questions were put to her directly. It was clear from her written work that she had much to offer the class through discussion. Although she was encouraged by the instructor to share her ideas with the class, Sarah just did not seem comfortable enough to spontaneously become involved in the discussion of issues. The class was a practice course and the first in the department to utilize interactive electronic conferencing to enhance teaching and learning goals. After she began posting to the conference board it

became evident to her classmates and the instructor that her grasp of practice principles and social work values and ethics were very well thought out and integrated. She also articulated them well and connected them to real life scenarios. Students were able to gain much from Sarah's postings and would often spontaneously post a request for her perspective on issues related to practice.

Tina was a very articulate and interactive student with a genuine desire for learning. She regularly asked questions in class and was always ready with an answer but was careful not to dominate the discussion. Tina was rather skilled in computer technology but had not experienced interactive electronic conferencing. She was eager to have this new and different opportunity initiated into the teaching and learning activities of the class. From the first day, Tina became an avid user of the conference. Through her involvement, she was able to expand her own learning and professional development while inciting the class and the instructor to greater involvement and integration. She read every student's comments and posted responses to every question. She raised the overall quality of responses by posting ideas that were substantive, carefully thought out, and tied to theory and practice. Her posts gave the instructor the opportunity to respond and pose questions that genuinely enhanced the learning experience for the entire class. Reflecting on the conference discussion in subsequent class sessions was very productive. In all likelihood, many of the questions that were generated through conferencing could not have been asked in class because of time constraints. However, because of the conference and the stimulation of a very capable and teachable student, learning reached a higher level in this course.

The use of interactive electronic conferencing provided a valuable avenue for expression and participation for these students. They were empowered by the process. Their confidence and grasp of the social work knowledge, skills, and value base expanded as their participation increased. All participants found through this extended interaction, that they could learn much from each other. In addition, reading the postings of other students promotes creative thinking. Interacting with one another in this manner gives students the opportunity to evaluate their professional progress in relation to each other. In addition to facilitating learning, students also have an avenue for increased mutual support and constructive criticism. These opportunities support the development of meaningful collegial relationships. These interactions occur on a regular basis simply because the opportunity to communicate with each other is always available.

Improving Relationships: Social work education regards two major outcomes as essential in the educational process: the student's acquisition and demonstration of the knowledge, skills, and values base of social work and the student's individual and professional growth and development. A key element in professional growth is the development of positive and productive emotional and intellectual relationships with other students and, perhaps as significant, with the instructor. Unquestionably, these relationships can be developed without the use of educational technology, however, interactive conferencing can facilitate and enhance the development of appropriate collegial relationships and a mentoring quality in relationships between faculty and students. Electronic conferencing increases the possibilities of realizing these desired outcomes because it provides a remarkably productive opportunity for interaction. Using this medium the instructor can post comments or questions to enhance a variety of teaching and learning objectives. The e-mail function offers another effective tool for increasing the frequency and the quality of communication. Instructors can respond quickly and frequently to messages students post to the board. The capability to generate a timely response makes it possible to seize a teaching moment that may otherwise be lost.

This technology strongly supports individualization of the learning experience. It provides opportunities for the instructor to directly participate in the socialization and professional growth of the student and it fosters the development and maintenance of a genuine mentoring relationship. Instructors are able to transcend the regularly scheduled class time and the somewhat limited office hour. It is a way for faculty to actively relate our professional and personal concerns for students rather effectively and efficiently. It is the experience of the authors that most students benefit from this type of faculty-student interaction. Student comments indicate that the interchange with the instructor and other students makes them feel more

connected to the class, the instructor, and the learning goals of the course. The following example is offered:

Pam was a "non-traditional" student--not unlike many others enrolled in the university. She was a single mother with three children and a full-time job. From the time she awakened in the morning she was running to meet her demanding schedule. Dropping her children at day care, she drove half an hour to class, arriving minutes before it began. She tried to be attentive but was often preoccupied and always appeared tired to the point of exhaustion. When class ended she left immediately to travel thirty minutes to her job. There was little, if any, interaction with her student colleagues. During the semester it was clear that Pam was not grasping the course content and her professional growth and development was nil. She was barely making it through each day. On rare occasions she came to the instructor's office to clarify assignments and discuss papers and upcoming exams. Questions about her overall well being would trigger a rush of tears. Words of encouragement and support and occasional phone calls from the instructor seemed to become lost in the frustration of her life. Pam was overwhelmed and feeling alienated and incapable. The demands on her time were creating incapacitating stresses and she found it difficult to feel successful in any area of her life. The semester was nearly an academic disaster for her.

The following semester Pam enrolled in the practice course where interactive electronic conferencing was being used. In the past Pam had not had time to learn to use a computer. A useful computer was setting at home and had never been touched. This activity seemed overwhelming. After the orientation session, Pam experienced some problems accessing the conference board but she did not become discouraged. A brief, private session with the instructor was all that was required to solve her problems with the technology. The ability to communicate with Pam via the conference and the e-mail function was a welcome opportunity for the instructor. Having access to other students and the instructor opened up a new educational dimension for Pam. She began to interact with her classmates and the instructor from her home in the evening. It was possible for the instructor to genuinely offer positive critique, encouragement, and direction in response to her postings to the conference board. Pam often commented that the class experience was the most satisfying and growth producing experience of her life. Pam's interaction with her student cohort in the social work program moved to a new and productive level. She was able to develop an open and productive relationship with students and the instructor and her feelings of alienation were replaced with a sense of belonging. Her self-esteem and interaction improved considerably, as did the quality of her academic work.

The instructor's opportunity to develop a responsive mentoring relationship with Pam is characteristic of what can occur through conferencing and use of the e-mail function for feedback, support, and encouragement. This activity holds considerable promise for individualizing the student, communicating regularly and honestly, and demonstrating respect and positive regard.

Opportunities for Feedback: The authors stated earlier in this paper that participation, relationship, and feedback are closely interrelated and interconnected experiences in the pedogogical process. The common facilitating element that makes it all work is communication. The conference can be used to increase communication and provide meaningful feedback in a variety of areas. Instructor activities can include comments and guidance on questions or answers posted to the conference and personal encouragement related to scholarship or professional and individual growth.

In one exercise using conferencing the instructor posted several ethical dilemmas involving direct services for clients and others related to agency and community issues. In responding to the cases students were to identify relevant passages from the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics, point out possible multiple responses to the problems, and discuss the comments of other participants. Here feedback is not just a two way process from instructor to student but has become a multi-layered collection of feedback loops from student back to the faculty and to other students. This process of statement followed

by a series of complex responses also stimulates in class discussion. In one exchange three points of view emerged in conferencing over the issue of client self determination versus the need for social workers to protect clients when their situation becomes self-destructive. The three points of view were used to develop three groups in class who developed arguments supporting each view. This process eventually led to some consensus over the specific case issue. This exercise was more efficient through the use of conferencing. By taking up only one class period for the three groups to meet instead of having to use what could have been two or three sessions to present the ethical dilemma, then develop the ideas or conflicting points of view and then have group meeting to form a consensus. The most important result, however, was in the students seeing their perspectives and points of view being treated in a serious manner. The class discussion became more productive. Students felt prepared for the in-class discussion.

Testing via the conference board has excellent potential but has not been fully utilized by the authors. Generally, questions related to a particular topic are posted to the conference at regular intervals and responses may be evaluated and scored. This approach supports the teaching and learning goals of learning from one another and the opportunity to give and receive feedback. If a more independent testing situation is desired, the instructor may choose to have the responses of students e-mailed directly to his or her address. Secure testing using a variety of question formats such as multiple choice, true false, and short answer can be executed by some electronic conference applications. In one course the instructor gave the students the opportunity to work together in dyads and develop one of the course examinations. The students chose a question from the material discussed in class and/or the text and posted it to the board. The student dyads became moderators of their question and were responsible for providing feedback to all class members regarding their answers. In addition, student moderators graded the answers in consultation with the instructor. This gave students the opportunity to extend their participation to the teaching/learning activity of testing. They were challenged in determining the significance of course material and participation in the collegial activity of critique.

The authors of this article have also been developing a process of student interaction between our respective campuses. One group of advanced practice students in the final semester of field experience use the conference to communicate over assignments and field issues. Students from a class at another university also have access to the same conference board. Both classes have expressed a great interest in communicating with one another over student issues and experiences and some contact has occurred.

[Top]

MEASUREMENT

Two methods of measuring the student experience are in process. A survey instrument will be administered to all students who used electronic conferencing in social work classes. The instrument will assess the students' perceptions of the usefulness of electronic conferencing as a teaching/learning tool and measure the extent to which the use of the technology affected participation, relationship building, and feedback. Data will be gathered over several semesters and analyzed in the Fall of 2000.

The second measure is a video-taped panel of students who have used electronic conferencing. They spontaneously discuss the merits of the technology as a teaching/learning tool and its affect on participation, relationship building, and feedback. The video taped is available for viewing. They gave support to the hypotheses of participation, relationship building, and feedback. Statements from the student panel included some of the following:

- "I was much more comfortable discussing topics on the conference than in class. I learned a lot from the opinions of others and comments from the teacher."
- "It was nice to have some place to state your opinions. I didn't seem like there was enough time in

class."

- "I felt much closer to everyone in the class after I got some feedback from them about my posting to the conference board."
- "Using the conference made me more comfortable talking about the class topics."
- "It was great to have the instructor e-mail personal notes directly to me."
- "I didn't participate much in class because I felt I would say something stupid. The conference board gave me the opportunity to see that many students actually gained something from my comments. It made me want to participate in class after awhile."
- "The conference made it possible for me to have much more contact and involvement with other students. My work schedule made it impossible for me to come to school early plus I had to leave right after class and couldn't talk with classmates. After work I could read comments on the conference and respond. It really helped me understand the HBSE material. It was a great help to me as a non-traditional student who had to travel and had to work."
- "I liked Professor Stokes's encouragement that he posted to the conference and the personal messages he sent by e-mail."
- "I really got to know other students in the class better. I felt more comfortable around them and took special interest in their learning, as well as my own. I guess I decided I had something to offer others."
- "I didn't think I was going to enjoy the conferencing board when Dr. ... first told us about it but I found it was one of the most enjoyable parts of the class."

[Top]

CONCLUSIONS

For social work education, evaluation of student readiness for entry level social work practice involves more than just a measurement of knowledge obtained over a four or five year period. Care must be given to understanding the student's level of internalization of core practice values and in their potential to handle the emotional demands of what is a challenging line of work. Evaluation for practice readiness must include a high degree of interaction among all the participants in the learning environment. Student participation in class assignment activities is a means of measuring commitment to the work. Active interaction between students and faculty enhances the student's readiness for the complex set of relationships they will find in practice.

Electronic conferencing can enhance participation, relationship, and feedback because of its ability to extend learning and interaction beyond the classroom. It provides an avenue for a continuation of learning through ongoing interaction with material from the class, extended interaction with classmates outside of the classroom setting, and the generation of topics and ideas independent of the classroom. Efficiency and speed can be overemphasized as justifications for the adoption of any computer technology for the classroom. Electronic conferencing, with enhancement of the learning environment to meet specific educational goals, is one tool that can be an effective part of course work in a social work program.

[Top]

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[Top]